

# Threatened court funding vital to helping at-risk youth in Island County | Sound Off

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**By Judges Vickie Churchill and Alan Hancock**

Two girls, ages 4 and 5, had been removed from their home for over two years due to allegations of abuse or neglect. Neither parent was suitable because of serious drug addictions and criminal behavior. Unfortunately, these little girls had been bounced from foster home to foster home while the state agency tried to get the parents to engage in services so they could safely parent the children. With each move, the children became less stable and more fragile until a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer was assigned to the case.

The Island County CASA volunteer worked with the state in finding a wonderful adoptive home to place the children when it became apparent the parents either would not or could not conquer their problems. The girls blossomed with the love and stability they found in their new home. The biological father, however, resisted letting the girls be adopted, even though he candidly acknowledged his inability to care for his daughters.

The CASA volunteer developed a relationship with the father over a year of meeting with him, and finally the father agreed that the best thing for his daughters was to allow the adoption. Today, the girls are thriving with loving adoptive parents and the father, who finally cleaned up his act, sees his daughters monthly. The girls have a permanent home, their “forever home.”

Island County is proud to have this CASA program and proud of the volunteers who contribute their time – and often their own money – to help children. Yet this program of dedicated volunteers who figuratively and literally save children is in jeopardy of shutting down if the Senate budget is adopted by the Legislature. If that happens, it will be a tragedy, as well as short sighted.

The Legislature has mandated that children in dependency actions, such as the two girls above, be appointed a guardian ad litem. The choice is between a CASA volunteer or a more-expensive, private guardian ad litem or paid attorney. The CASA program dramatically leverages scarce public dollars to provide a mandated service, saving millions for the counties and the state, in addition to saving children.

Tragically, Washington is dead last – 50th out of 50 states – in the funding provided to the court system. Even worse, the state spends only 7/10th of one percent of the state's operating budget on the entire judicial branch.

If the Senate budget is adopted by the Legislature, then another \$7.9 million will be cut from the judicial branch's administrative agency, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). If

implemented, this would result in a 31.2 percent cut to AOC alone, and a 43 percent reduction to AOC since 2009.

The cuts are so drastic for the judicial branch because 64 percent of the AOC budget is either constitutionally protected or the Legislature itself has put a proviso on parts of it, so it cannot be cut. As a result, the cuts proposed in the Senate budget would have to come entirely from the remaining 36 percent — direct court services and pass throughs, such as CASA.

In addition to the CASA program, the devastating cuts would jeopardize court interpreters for those who cannot understand English and would not understand what is happening in court without an interpreter; a contribution to the salaries of district and qualifying municipal court judges who preside over trials involving state statutes; and funding for the clerk's office staff to collect legal financial obligations, a program that brings in millions of dollars for the state and the counties.

The House budget is better, but it still would cut \$12 million from truancy funding, a statute passed by the Legislature in 1995 known as the Becca Bill. The statute was named for a 13-year-old runaway girl who was murdered in Spokane. The legislation was passed to keep kids in school and help families with at-risk children.

Don't close the doors to the courthouse for our children or others who need these services. Treat our CASA volunteers as the valuable resource they are. The cuts will be devastating. We urge the Legislature to maintain funding for the trial courts, even if it is only 7/10th of one percent of the state operating budget.

*Vickie Churchill and Alan Hancock are judges in Island County Superior Court.*  
<http://www.whidbeynewstimes.com/opinion/204112651.html>